Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention

Technical Assistance Bulletin

Urban Youth Public Education for the African American Community

The Urban Youth Public Education campaign's processes and strategies provide an important model for the prevention community. This technical assistance bulletin synthesizes the lessons learned so that other African American communities can replicate the campaign for their youth. It also shows how effective it can be to target a program to a specific racial population.

Research increasingly indicates that the unique experiences of communities of color — African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander — require programmatic responses based on the cultural norms, beliefs, and needs of each community. The emphasis on programming targeted for each community grows out of this newly gained respect and appreciation for the diversity evident in America's population.

The Urban Youth Public Education campaign was a Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) initiative that embodied the concept of targeted programming not only in terms of cultural sensitivity but also of community participation. The campaign, which began in 1990, targeted inner-city African American children, youth, and families. The initial 14 campaign sites included Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas/Fort Worth, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Memphis, New York, Philadelphia, Raleigh/Durham, and Washington, DC. Additional campaign sites have included Boston, Nashville, Newark, and Seattle.

Researching African American Youth

Effective targeted programming requires in-depth research into the realities and concerns of the population. The Urban Youth Public Education campaign's market research — exploratory discussions, focus groups, literature review — has provided a wealth of information about the attitudes and beliefs of young, urban African Americans and their communities.
Among the findings:

- Among urban African Americans under the age of 16, substance use is increasing but remains relatively low compared to whites, contrary to commonly held beliefs.
- A picture of resiliency and strength, and a vote of confidence for African American youth emerges that counteracts the stereotypical images of hopelessness and despair often associated with the African American community.

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- Community members view unfair stigmatization in the media as the primary cause of pervasive negative impressions.
- African American youth are highly influenced by African American adults. These adults — mothers, fathers, uncles, grandmothers — provide the role models who have the most impact on the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of community youth. But these adults may also expose children and youth to drugs and alcohol and/or victimize them through violence or neglect.

The positive messages inherent in these findings — that in the face of overwhelming odds many African American youth manage to evade the lure of drugs, that the role of African American adults is influential and positive — rebuke the media stereotypes. They also effectively clarify campaign goals and provide direction for prevention themes and messages.

Replicating the Campaign in Other Communities

Preparation, flexibility, and innovation are important elements in establishing an Urban Youth Public Education campaign *(see box)*. Also important are creating community ownership, establishing campaign themes and messages, and using multiple channels and formats.

Create Community Ownership

Five key tasks set the stage for community ownership of an Urban Youth Public Education campaign:

- Holding gatekeeper meetings. Meet with community gatekeepers, including State officials, local CSAP grantees, city officials, and community leaders. In addition to formally recognized community leaders, include those nonofficial leaders who often exist in the African American community — men and women held in high esteem, often as result of their work as block captains, church deacons, or volunteers working with neighborhood youth.

  These meetings provide information about the campaign to gatekeepers and answer their questions. The meetings also provide opportunities to obtain information on key contacts and to collect resource materials. They help position the campaign as a major initiative and demonstrate a commitment to community involvement and control. The meetings also help identify and address community concerns and frustrations.
- Forming community coalitions. A central feature of any plan for local ownership of a campaign is forming a community coalition to serve as an advisory group. Coalitions generally have between 20 and 40 members and represent a broad range of citywide and neighborhood organizations and services.
- Identifying a lead agency. A lead agency, which takes the responsibility for day-to-day campaign operations and for supervising onsite staff, is typically selected from the ranks of the local coalition. This lead agency should be African American controlled (in terms of founding mission, staff, and/or clients served). For a successful campaign, a lead agency should also (1) have citywide jurisdiction, (2) have demonstrated fiscal accountability, (3) have a solid community reputation, (4) have been operating in the community for at least 5 years, (5) be legally established (incorporated), and (6) have broad-based support.
- Recruiting a local coordinator. The lead agency will recruit a local coordinator to oversee day-to-day activities. In most cases, the local coordinator is the only paid staff for a campaign, with staff representatives of the lead agency and the local coalition serving as volunteers. Local coordinator responsibilities include coordinating local materials development, assisting national staff with pretesting national campaign products, conducting ongoing public relations activities, maintaining local campaign records and other documentation.

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Helpful Hints for Replicating the Campaign in the Community

Preparation, flexibility, and innovation are key:

- Prepare the community to undertake a prevention campaign. Take advantage of available training and networking opportunities and utilize available resources.
- Be flexible. Plans may change, coalitions may fracture, deadlines may be missed. Flexibility helps to ensure that opportunities are maximized.
- Be innovative. Emphasize the strategies that best suit the needs of the African American children, youth, and families in the community. Do not force fit "tried and true" solutions. Respect each community's uniqueness.

In addition:

- Make no assumptions about the target audience. Conduct market research to test and validate messages and methodologies.
- Build in sufficient time to conduct market research and gather community support.
- Involve the target audience in the development of campaign themes and messages.
- Make sure the local coordinator and staff are located right in the targeted community — not downtown or in some other remote location.
- Address critics; answer questions; respond to feedback.
- Develop evaluation strategies to gauge the impact of the campaign efforts.

and planning local kickoff activities and other special events.

- Forming a youth advisory panel. The advice and consent of youth are an important demonstration of a campaign's commitment to African American youth. A community youth advisory panel, typically composed of 8 to 10 youth, ages 9 to 17, advises the local coalition on how to develop strategies and activities that appeal to youth and reach the greatest number of local youth. Remember that parental consent for participation is required.

For a successful campaign, select males and females in equal numbers and representative of a broad range of personalities and backgrounds. Base the selections on recommendations from coalition members, but look beyond the typical "good student" and include all types of young people. Consider leadership potential as well as grade point average. For example, an advisory panel could include students from vocational and alternative school settings as well as average students with strong histories of community service volunteer work.

Establish Campaign Themes and Messages

To magnify the positive messages from the market research findings, the campaign's messages should stress that it is important for adults to serve as role models and that adult behavior sets an example for youth. Campaign messages should also strive to help youth reach maturity with a sense of competence, respect for others, and hope for the future. The African proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child" epitomizes this concept. By Our Own Hands, the Urban Youth Public Education campaign's slogan, and the circle of hands joined together that is the campaign's logo, further emphasize this sense of the community working together, hand in hand, to solve problems in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

Campaign messages thus should refute negative images of African American youth, support these youth by celebrating the positive aspects of their lives and communities, publicize their lower usage rates, and address other ways the youth are affected by drugs. All campaign messages can make the following clear:

- African American youth are valued by their communities.
- African American youth have demonstrated impressive resiliency in the face of adversity.
- African American youth are engaged in a wide variety of positive activities.
- African American youth need the support and attention of adults to remain drug free.

Each community must fine tune these themes and messages to meet its specific needs, especially as they appear in campaign materials. In one community's campaign draft poster, for example, the teenagers appeared to be dancing. Both youth and adults in the community viewed this as stereotypical. The final version depicted youth in many activities, including working on the computer, playing instruments, reading, and talking together, and emphasized "We have better things to do than drugs." Teachers, clergy, children, parents, and other community members applauded the campaign for successfully articulating a positive message about African American youth.

Use Multiple Channels and Formats

Encourage innovation and promote the Urban Youth Public Education campaign through a variety of traditional and nontraditional communication channels. Include, for example, television and radio public service announcements, billboards, and bus and subway posters as well as bumper stickers, T-shirts, baseball caps, church fans, book marks, coffee mugs, and note cards. Enlist local sponsors, develop local and educational materials, and sponsor special events.

- **Enlisting local sponsors.** Businesses and corporations are an important component of the local community. Among incentives for their support of a campaign are goodwill, opportunities for name recognition and product promotion, and exposure to other business people in the community. Examples of local support include a savings and loan association in Los Angeles that provided meeting space, giveaways, and cash contributions; a local utility company that funded a campaign reception in Atlanta; and a local museum that provided staff support, art supplies, and exhibit space in Detroit.
- **Developing local materials.** For example, in Baltimore the local campaign collaborated with the State attorneys office and the school system to develop an anti-drug-use poetry book that featured poems by inner-city school children. For another example, in Houston the local campaign received funding to develop a locally produced television public service announcement written and performed by youth. And in Los Angeles, the local

campaign developed a traveling exhibit highlighting the artistic talents and accomplishments of African American youth that has been installed at local art galleries and in public libraries.

- **Developing educational materials.** Highlight findings from market research in educational materials that are targeted to adults and intermediaries and that suggest ways they can help African American youth continue to resist drug use or involvement. These materials might include fact sheets, an activity planner, and a 10-step guide for parents. Consider developing additional educational materials for members of the media to suggest how drug abuse problems within the African American community can be covered with fairness and sensitivity.

- **Sponsoring special events.** To kick off the campaign, hold an essay, rap, poster, or poetry contest. Or hold a communitywide rally and a workshop on drug prevention issues. Feature music and drama performances by local African American youth. Ask city leadership to honor the kickoff day with an official proclamation or with other support.

  Sponsor ongoing activities in the community, such as sports, games, health fairs, and other community events. These activities help keep the community focused on the goals and progress of the campaign.

Resources

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention Technical Assistance Bulletins. The following titles in the series are especially relevant and are available from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI).

Identifying the Target Audience, 1997.

A Key Step In Developing Prevention Materials Is To Obtain Expert and Gatekeeper Reviews, 1994.

Pretesting Is Essential; You Can Choose From Various Methods, 1994.

You Can Avoid Common Errors As You Develop Prevention Materials, 1994.

You Can Use Communications Principles To Create Culturally Sensitive and Effective Materials, 1994.

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Cultural Competence Series. *The Challenge of Participatory Research: Preventing Alcohol-Related Problems in Ethnic Communities,* 1995. Available from NCADI.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852, (301) 468-2600 or (800) 779-6686. Internet World Wide Web address: http://www.health.org. Provides information on substance abuse research literature, programs, and educational materials.

Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute. *Making Health Communication Programs Work: A Planners Guide.* 1989. Provides information on all aspects of health communications including readability and pretesting. To order, call 1-800-4-CANCER.

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This bulletin is one in a series developed to assist programs that are working to prevent substance abuse problems. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact the CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500, Bethesda, MD 20814-4820, (301) 941-8500.